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EXAMINATION

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EXAMINATION OF A PAMPHLET,

ENTITLED

A Brief Review

OF

DR. HORNER'S NECROLOGICAL NOTICE

OF

PHILIP SYNG PHYSICK, M.D.

PHILADELPHIA:—1838.

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EXAMINATION...

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“A BRIEF REVIEW of Dr. HORNER’s ‘*Necrological Notice*’ of PHILIP SYNG
PHYSICK, M. D. Philadelphia:—1838.”

THIS is the title of a pamphlet of twenty-two pages, which its author professes to be a review of the paper published in the 8th No., Vol. ii., of the *Select Medical Library, &c.* Having had an opportunity, through a copy sent, of its perusal, we shall claim the attention of our readers, for a time, whilst noticing this extraordinary production. A fly sheet at the beginning informs us, that some errors in the arrangement of sentences and words have been permitted to pass without correction, in order to save the time requisite for remodelling the review. Whether it was the reviewer’s time which was the important consideration in this matter of a correct impression, or an eager desire not to delay to the community the benefit of his labours, is not stated with the precision that we could wish. The reviewer having withheld his name, our entire ignorance of the person, will therefore give others some right to assert for themselves, what he has claimed in his own case: to wit, not to doubt good intentions, but simply to advance the charge of want of skill, discretion, or information.* We also declare, like him, that we do not impugn his motives in, or question the sincerity of, his regard for Dr. Physick, but that our business is with the review, which its author admits to be “a hastily written production,”† a feature too evident to require his acknowledgment of the fact.

A remarkable omission in this pretended analysis of Dr. Horner’s Notice of Dr. Physick is, that the writer, though calling it a *Review*, has not even stated whether the “Necrological Notice” is professedly a commendatory one or a deliberate libel on the subject of it. His readers, however, are left to infer the latter by these sentences:‡ “This is one of the many instances afforded by the biographer throughout his notice of his entire forgetfulness of the charge reposed in his hands.”§ “There seems to have been a determination not to present the brightest side of a character, which had always been sustained through the severest ordeal.” Nor has the reviewer informed us that there is a single laudatory paragraph in the Necrological Notice, so that readers of the review who had not seen the notice itself, would infer that Dr. Horner, after living in known harmony with Dr. Physick, and with unqualified open admiration of his character and professional bearing for nearly thirty years, had all at once,

* Page 9.

† Page 20.

‡ Page 8.

§ Page 4.

and on an occasion calling specifically for the marked expression of his esteem, been so clouded in his affections and understanding, as not to know, in the slightest degree, what was due to his own consistency, and to his deference for that truly great man. The reviewer has, also, adroitly thrown the Notice wholly into a libellous form, by selecting from it passages which, in their original position, were sufficiently explained by their context, but which have been perverted entirely by insulation, and by the morbid interpretation which he puts on them. And to make this libel of his own creation more effective, he furnishes in his own language a summary or synopsis of it, at page twenty one, which exhibits a most remarkable strain of perverted imagination, and series of arbitrary conclusions.

After this exposition of the general tendencies of the review, we shall now take it up more in detail; and proceed to show that, with the use of Johnson or of Webster's Dictionary—consultation with a discreet medical man, and that indispensable aid "Time," of which the reviewer was deprived for the mature reading of the Notice, and to make his reflections thereon—we shall proceed, we repeat, to show that his gaze might have become accustomed to the "brilliantly incomprehensible"* passages of the *Necrological Notice*. If he had examined it with deliberation, he would have changed his mind about its complexion, and concluded that the discolouration was with himself and not with the author: Or he might have contented himself with the conclusion he had reached, that its faults were involuntary—the result of want of skill; and thus charitably undeserving of the time, which appears to be much occupied, and we hope to a more valuable purpose than in writing such reviews.

In beginning with the "incomprehensibles," we may state that the life of the Author of the *Necrological Notice* has been spent in a technical routine, in which the necessity of a sedulous examination of facts, has precluded all aim at brilliancy. But whilst we speak to the charge of incomprehensible, we would disclaim for the author the prefix brilliant, in whatever sense it was used by the reviewer, unless in that of *lucus a non lucendo*.

The first of the "incomprehensibles" for which a meaning is solicited, is the title, *Necrological Notice*. Our friend, Noah Webster, defines *Necrological* as pertaining to, or giving an account of the dead; and as his dictionary is not confined to the halls of Philosophy; the term is not very far fetched, it may be found even in the primary schools. But in regard to its currency we may state, that it is the practice of literary and scientific bodies on the death of a member, to request from some one of their number a "*Necrological Notice*" of the deceased. This notice may be written and merely deposited in the Archives of the Society, or it may be the subject of an oration: it remains with the society to determine on either course. On the demise of the celebrated Dr. Wistar, his friend, the Abbé Correa, handed in to the American Philosophical Society a French composition, styled by him "*Note Necrologique*" which is remarkable for its graphic delineation of the deceased, as well as for the reflecting powers of the author.

The second "incomprehensible" is the term "sardonic smile," which according to the reviewer means a *forced, insincere* one; but sardonic being derived from the herb sardonia, our friend, Noah Webster, has very properly defined it to be *convulsive—involuntary* laughter; the convulsive motions of the lips and cheeks

resembling such as are produced by the use of that herb. In regard to the general currency of this term: there is certainly none more fully authorized by medical and literary use, or of which a more novel conception could be instituted than that it meant its opposite—a *forced, insincere* smile. We would recommend our reviewer to the French Academy: his invention of so remarkable a novelty, deserves the patient discussion which that learned body extends to new words, and to new meanings especially such as contradict old ones. We hope, with all due respect, that this philological effort is the result of mature reflection, and not a chance production of haste.

Other “incomprehensibles” are the dogmatic points of theology, &c. An attempt at a full solution of this part of the enigma might make confusion worse confounded: we therefore limit ourselves to say, that as the dictionary is still a useful book we reply in its sense, that dogma means an established or a received principle, a doctrine or creed. Dogmatic theology includes not only the simple and elementary religious truths; but also the doctrines and opinions held at various times by Christian churches. Not to fatigue the reviewer, we would content ourselves with referring him on this subject to Muenscher's *Elements of Dogmatic History*.

Other criminations will now be examined of the “*Necrological Notice*,” that obscure, unusual, and offensive term, which has every where in the review the inverted commas affixed to it, as if to show its suspicious character, like the word *Poison*, written by the apothecary on a bottle of family medicine, to admonish that none but the initiated ought to dispense it.

The Necrologist has scandalized the Reviewer, by mentioning among the unquestionably fine points of Dr. Physick's person, that his ear was not one of them. As to his foot, we incline to think that there was a real mistake in Dr. Horner's notice of it, owing to this member being commonly well, and loosely covered. But how are we to meet such sensibilities? The son-in-law of Sir Walter Scott has furnished a long account of that celebrated writer's lame foot, which was the result of disease. Lord Byron's acknowledged admirers have done the same for his lame foot, which was congenitally so, and which they state he was very sensitive about, and particularly careful, when seated, to place behind the other. John Hunter, the surgeon, had a stiff thumb. Now, in regard to Dr. Physick, we do not believe that he ever cared about his ears, though the fashion in which he wore his hair concealed them; and we believe that if he had met with persons who felt uneasiness about the shape of their ears, he would at once have said: “Look at mine; they have executed their office for me, which is all I require of them.” He was certainly in the habit of assuaging the distress of his patients by alluding humorously or otherwise to his own infirmities, to show that the former were not solitary in their afflictions. In lecturing on Anatomy, he showed, with great good humour, and to the amusement of a class of four hundred students, the command which he had over the cutaneous muscle of the neck; a control not held by one in a hundred.

A description of personal peculiarities is unquestionably one of the objects of a biographical notice, and does not imply any want of regard for the object of it. The examples to this effect are too numerous to be denied. The most renowned of modern naturalists, the Baron Cuvier, and who was so often selected to deliver commemorative eulogies on departed worth, in a notice before the

French Institute of the philosopher Count Rumford, was not only thus minute ; but he informs us, that one of the peculiarities of the deceased Count was his being so economical of the materials, and also of the powers of digestion, that he ate no meats but such as were *roasted*. Here then are two great men : one regulated by, and another commemorating, what appears to be a nursery trifle, unless its value be tried by the proper scale. We may ask the reviewer, what apology has he to offer for his want of candour, in separating from a long paragraph of laudatory matter* the only phrases which could be rendered a doubtful praise by such separation, and presenting them as an embodying of the sentiments of the Author of the Notice ?

Equal injustice is done in the reference to Dr. Physick's known fondness for practical mechanics. The statement of the boyish exercise of, and of the predilection for them, through life, is by the reviewer asserted to mean, that Dr. Horner informs his readers that Dr. Physick was by inclination a shoemaker or a silversmith ; and this sapient inference is reached in the midst of page after page in the *Necrological Notice*, in which are exhibited Dr. Physick's extraordinary qualifications for the profession of medicine, and his signal contributions to it. So far from his mechanical turn derogating from the just estimation in which he was held, it is notorious that it was considered one of the most felicitous features in his character of surgeon ; and that, through its astonishing fertility of invention and of application, he made cures where every one else failed. The allusion to the Doctor's mechanical turn accounts for a great deal in his professional life, and the value of the statement in the *Necrological Notice* is to be measured by that scale.

The mind of the reviewer seems to be singularly unfurnished with parallel instances in history, on all of the points of character in Dr. Physick to which the author has alluded. With more information, it would have occurred to him that John Hunter was apprenticed to a cabinet maker ; that David Rittenhouse worked in the fields with plough and hoe on his father's farm, and when a boy made a wooden clock ; that James Ferguson attended to sheep in the field when a boy, and also constructed a wooden clock. Thus, when we read of the first being the author of the celebrated *Treatise on Inflammation*—the second the maker of *Orreries*, the observer and calculator of the transit of Venus, in 1769, which will give him celebrity to the end of time—and the third, author of the *Astronomical Tables*, &c. ; in the estimate of these three great men we always look on their youthful acts as the germinations and subsequent aids of their genius. We will make a still larger vindication of the claims of mechanical talent to respect at whatever age it is displayed. A survey of our city at present shows, that there are no more copious streams of *honour* and wealth than those derived from mechanical work. It is only within a few days that we have seen a notice of a second locomotive being ordered, and on its passage to Austria. The fabric of the youngest of nations going to one of the most advanced in arts and civilization ! But still farther : mechanical suggestions and combinations so largely and frequently occupy the human mind, that in some systems of philosophy their origin has been referred to a special faculty. In fine, the reviewer, by determinately making strange of every thing, exhibits so clearly the excess.

of writing over reading, that we may fairly conclude his own mental horizon, to be the limits within which he took the materials to furnish his pages.

The reviewer appears also to be in great dudgeon at the account of the interview between the celebrated John Hunter and his pupil young Physick; but we are left to conjecture the manner and degree of criminality of the account—whether it was the effect the ideas of it created on the vision and olfactories of the reviewer, or whether it was the incongruity of a great surgeon and anatomist directing his pupil to follow in the steps by which he himself had been led to the highest elevation of medical science. His wrath explodes more distinctly in the same paragraph, when alluding to the Essay *De Apoplexia*, because it is not expressly stated that Dr. Physick himself put it into its Latin dress. In regard to this essay no one acquainted with Dr. Physick's qualifications for medical investigation will think, upon reading it, that he put them to the test on the occasion, or made it an elaborate effort; and it is sufficiently clear that it was not the intention of the Necrologist to excite a doubt of his writing it in Latin, but merely to state that if a question should arise on the subject, he had no positive testimony to bear on the inquiry. To any person at all acquainted with the history of graduation in the Edinburgh school, a question of this nature would excite no surprise. The honourable allusion in the *Necrological Notice** to Dr. Physick's classical acquirements, and to his classical predilections up to the day of his death, if it had been considered, as it obviously was, the fair context for a reviewer to judge by, would have saved the declaration now distinctly made; that Dr. Physick could, it is believed, at all periods of his professional life have written a latin essay in a chaste, elegant, and scholar-like manner.

The circumstances of the Doctor's outfit have also excited the sensibilities of the reviewer; and from the difficulty of their interpretation are among the "incomprehensibles." The Doctor had so little reserve on this subject himself, and considered it so great a lesson of industry, that there are probably hundreds of young physicians whose despondency he has attempted to relieve, by telling jocularly how he himself started. Industry, perseverance, was his saying to all; and as to the smallness of a man's beginning, the less it was the more it excited his admiration at success.

Dr. Horner† informs his readers that Dr. Physick was particularly intolerant of opposition and of disingenuousness on the part of a patient. The text stands in that relation, followed by some illustrative occurrences. But the reviewer has detached the first idea from the second, and given the following interpretation, "You (Dr. Physick) are very irritable and intolerant of opposition; even the legitimate exhibition of maternal solicitude will cause an outbreking of your temper." This fabrication of words and sentiments by the reviewer is passed off as the purport of the narrative of an author who has declared, that Dr. Physick discharged most conscientiously his duties to patients, and watched them with a vigilance and anxiety which never remitted till their fate was ascertained, and that he was the most perfect example of a surgeon that this country has ever seen. What, Mr. Reviewer, has become of those sentiments of justice and moderation professed so repeatedly in your production? We will, however, for your special satisfaction, give a key to the phrase which has excited you so much. It is well known to medical men that firmness and decision

are the characteristics of a high order of medical genius; and that a physician, thus endowed, feeling the great responsibility devolving upon him, in dangerous cases, must either have his advice observed, or he will not remain in attendance. He considers the alternative indispensable to his sense not merely of dignity but of duty. Now Dr. Physick came up precisely to these conditions; and no one, we believe, in latter years expected him to attend on any other terms, so fully was this principle settled by his acts, as well as by the approbation of his profession. This is precisely the intolerance exhibited in the little illustrative anecdotes introduced by the author of the Notice.

The opposite of this dignified course we shall give in another anecdote. A courtly doctor, when attending one of the princesses, was asked by George III. if he did not think a little ice might benefit her. "Your majesty is right," was the reply "I shall order some forthwith." "But perhaps it might be too cold," added the kind monarch. "Perhaps your majesty is right again; therefore her royal highness had better get it *warmed*."*

A mere playful allusion to Dr. Physick's notions of French medicine, is made by the reviewer a ghost of the first magnitude, with the following label on his forehead: "You (Dr. Physick) can never have enlarged views of professional subjects, because you are bitterly prejudiced against a nation (France) [the French] the most distinguished in the world of science, and you will take no hint from her [it]." In rebuke of this aspersion of the reviewer's own invention and language, he furnishes a letter which its illustrious owner did show to the author of the Notice, and did on the occasion express his pleasure at; notwithstanding the reviewer's assertion that the author of the "Necrological Notice" was not one of those with whom Dr. Physick conversed on the subject.

French medicine had made no strong impression in this country prior to the year 1820: it was later even before its value was felt in Great Britain. The allusions to it by the writers and teachers in the latter country, had been generally censorious and disparaging, the evident result of strong national antipathies. The same sentiments had been, owing to our descent, largely incorporated with the medical mind of the United States. It is, therefore, simply an historical fact; notorious, but accounted for by the circumstances of the period of their education, that the older physicians of this country did not appreciate French authorities in medicine; and many do not to this day. Dr. Physick might, therefore, without any disparagement to his general merits, be quoted as under the influence of the impressions of early life on this subject; notwithstanding the evidence furnished by the reviewer's visit, on which occasion he was found surrounded by French medical periodicals. An incidental allusion to English nationality is, also, a subject of crimination, though the point is so fully acknowledged as to have been noticed in all parts of the world, and on many occasions humorously dramatized, even by their own writers.

The grand assault upon the Necrological Notice was reserved for the discussion on Dr. Physick's religious or theological views. It is here that the "brilliantly incomprehensible" shines in its utmost darkness of lustre, according to the reviewer; and notwithstanding his admission of the impenetrable ideas with which the notice was thronged, so as to "defy criticism," and the consequent inconsistency of his reaching a conclusion under such an admitted chaos, he

tells us that the “biographer (necrologist) has charged our departed surgeon with *infidelity* of the darkest character, and at the same time attacked religion itself.” The extracts which the reviewer has made, being limited to such as suited his postulate, he has left from the middle of a paragraph the qualifying context: “With strong sentiments of *piety*, he (Dr. Physick) was constantly in a state of anxious *vacillation* in regard to the Christian faith.” He has afterwards dressed up in italics, “he was repelled from it by the invincible principles of his own mind—it was an incomprehensible code to him, and so it continued to the last.” We now ask, does the reviewer mean to say that Dr. Physick comprehended the mysteries of the Christian faith? Does the enlightened reviewer himself understand the nature of the Trinity? How a sacrament is effectual for the purpose under which it was instituted? How the unequal lots of men in regard to health and comfort is consistent with justice in the Almighty? How it is likewise consistent with impartiality, that it has been his purpose from all eternity to elect a portion of the human family out of mankind, and bring them to everlasting salvation? Or does he comprehend any other of those august principles, which are intended to define the relation of man to his Creator, and require faith to make them be received. Nothing was said of Dr. Physick’s final reception or rejection of Christian doctrine, simply as a matter of faith. The highly estimable and learned clergyman who attended his last moments could give the best testimony on this subject, and declare to what extent his tormenting doubts were solved. The evidence of his relation is certainly to be relied upon for the period indicated; and if applicable at the moment of his death, shows that his difficulties were all removed. This consummation we have reason to believe has been withheld, in the wise dispensations of Providence, from some of the most pious men that ever lived, but who, in the estimation of our reviewer, ought to be stigmatized with the opprobrious term of *Infidel*, because a celestial grace, the absolute and free gift of the divinity, has been withheld from them. We refer this topic, however, to the theologians. The facts are notorious, that Dr. Physick’s mind, for many years before his death, was in a state of great anxiety; that he talked with every body capable of instructing or comforting him on religious subjects, and that he underwent trials from which the Saints themselves have not been exempted. The principal object of the author of the Notice was, evidently, not to bring out things hidden in a corner, but by displaying such as were well known, to elucidate them by the lights of the original faculties, and of the acquired habits of a great man. Precisely the same course of trial and uncertainty is so common in the history of the human mind, that nothing but the susceptible imagination of the reviewer could have extracted from it the momentous consequences of infidelity, and an attack upon religion, more fearful than that of Paine or Hume. We would say: Compose yourself, Mr. Reviewer; the fair fabric of Christianity, which, when its foundations on earth were yet imperfectly cemented, bore without shock or break, the secession and fierce assaults of a Roman Emperor, will stand without the aid of the eminent men of any country. And, on the other hand, as to Dr. Physick’s character, it is of such excellent composition, that it would bear the misconceptions of twenty Necrological Reviewers.

To conclude with this part of the Necrological Notice and its reviewer.—A mind less predetermined than his, on some ground best known to himself, could,

according to our understanding, scarcely have adopted any other general conclusions, than that a comprehension of the mysteries of the Christian religion is one thing, and belief in them another; and that if belief awaits the comprehension, it must be unavoidably postponed during life. If on the contrary the grace of belief is conferred, any rational period of life is suitable for its profession and active enjoyment.

The allusion to the directions of Dr. Physick in regard to his interment, and to the feebleness of his last days, has also excited the reviewer against the remarks and explanations of the author of the Notice. We could ask: since when has it become criminal to attribute irregularities of disposition to the languor of illness and of age? Does not the whole chapter of human life, in every age, point out these consequences to great and to small? Does not the sacred volume constantly speak of them? Does not the pulpit resound with them? Can we shut our understandings in any way to them? Is it not a lesson to all of us, that even the gifted Physick yielded to these influences? And can any one attach shame to him for having been bent by one of the most universal laws of his Creator, at the age of three score years and ten,—a period when, to most men, their strength is declared to be but labour and sorrow. The writer of the review has, however, such a singular aptitude at discovery, as to have ascertained that Dr. Horner “attempted to affix a stain upon the memory of Philip Syng Physick,” by stating that he, the deceased, like the rest of mortals for generations since the creation, had yielded to his destiny. The reviewer, with his usual candour in the selection of sentences, does not however let us know that there is one* in the following words: “surely to the intelligent no apology can be wanting for the infirmities of age and of illness.”

But an entire vindication of the allusion exists in the circumstances of that period, which, with a very small inquiry or concession of charitable judgment on the part of the reviewer, would have been evident to him.

Dr. Physick's distinction attended him even in the retirement of a sick chamber; and he paid the customary tax, in some of the incidents of the latter being noised abroad, and imperfectly, we may say injuriously, understood by the public, even at distant points of this country. Two large bodies of strangers then in the city—the state convention and the medical classes—participated more or less in the rumours of the day, and of course would convey their impressions throughout the United States. But an explanation of the feeble health of Dr. Physick, afforded an abundant apology for every thing evincive of eccentricity or inconsistency. An enunciation therefore of the fact by the author of the Notice, was a vindication prompted alike by friendship and justice, and not an aspersion. It divulged nothing but what was current in regard to his state of mind and the disposition of his person, and it afforded the best possible explanation of their seeming inconsistency, with the man of genius whom the public had respected so much. Any other view, especially that suggested by the critic on whose animadversions we are now commenting, would have placed Dr. Physick in revolting contradiction with his own long professional life, and have made one class of his observations and inquiries in it a cause for censure, in place of their being, as they are commonly regarded, one of legitimate boast and honour.

We join cordially with the reviewer in deploring the absence of a pen so able as that of Professor Chapman to do justice to the merits of Dr. Physick. His admitted and distinguished talents are both adequate and appropriate to the task; and we look for its accomplishment with interest. Any conjectural comparisons of what this performance would, or will be with the *Necrological Notice* must be unreasonable and unnecessary. The author of the latter only desires that he may be understood and correctly represented. If, however, the rules of fair interpretation be neglected, his abundant respect for the memory of his deceased friend, Dr. Physick, will, we vouch, prompt him in some form, to put the author of such perversions and his readers right. Of his capacity to do the latter we have some confidence: and would therefore request of the writer of the *Brief Review*, that both publications may be equally distributed. For this purpose an exchange of copies—we speak advisedly—may be very properly made, without any abatement of the sentiments of comity professed on both sides of the argument. It must certainly be disagreeable to the author of the *Necrological Notice*, to be held up to the public as the promulgator of sentiments which he never entertained; and still more so when taken in connexion with the last office to a deceased friend, especially after its discharge received the approbation of gentlemen of discriminating judgment, who heard it read, and whose attachment and veneration for the memory of Dr. Physick had been settled by years of probation. The author of the notice may, however, obtain consolation from the reflection that the strange misconceptions of the reviewer being real, and not affected, there are possibly other minds susceptible, more or less, of the same disturbance,—and if there were only half a dozen such, Dr. Horner, we are sure, would think his time well spent in dispelling their illusions, and in asserting that his fidelity to the memory of a great man is unshaken. He conceives himself to be one of the conservators of that memory; and his efforts, however imperfect, will not be wanting during his natural life to do justice to and perpetuate it after his death; and he believes, moreover, that this memory, if properly preserved now, will make one of the primary elements in the history of American Medicine, when we become old as a nation, and a recurrence is had to past times for the elucidation of the state of that science.

As to the concluding paragraph of the review, we conceive its sentiments to be precisely the deductions from what occurs every where in the *Necrological Notice*; but, unhappily, their premises either did not reach the eye of the reviewer in preparing his “*hastily written production*,” or perhaps being also among the “*brilliantly incomprehensible*” parts of the notice, dazzled his gaze into obscurity. A captious accusation of many trivial parts of the *Necrological Notice*, must be evident to every one who has read it and the review; but the intentions of the reviewer in these respects we forbear to impugn, as we are disposed to receive in good part his declaration that he has no disrespectful feeling to the author. Still, we must assert, that the construction of every part of the review looks forced and insincere—we would say “*sardonic*,” in compliment to the reviewer’s new light on the meaning of that word, but that our readers might not understand us.

